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The Pastor's Theology of Uncertainty in *Lila*

Ben Lehnardt

In *Lila*, Marilynne Robinson characterizes preacher John Ames with hesitation and uncertainty, traits that seem contrary to his profession. Throughout the novel, rather than dispelling doubt, he frequently acknowledges the mysteries of God, life, and the universe. He says “I don’t know” more than any other phrase. While this apprehensive approach to theology may initially seem to be rooted in weakness or ignorance, it is actually the product of a deliberate theological decision and in fact, what may seem to be Ames’s greatest weakness is actually his greatest strength; his ability to embrace ambiguity and act in spite of insecurity allows him to better serve his parishioners and family. While Ames develops this theology of uncertainty in his teaching, Robinson reinforces the same ideology in the structure of the novel through her ambivalent representation of Ames’s relationship with Lila. Robinson further reinforces the theme by blending past and present in Lila’s narrative and creating a mysterious and slippery atmosphere. Such a perspective on the validity of uncertainty offers a fresh theological and theoretical perspective within the context of the ongoing debate between scientific positivism and humanistic philosophy and argues for a more merciful approach to religious philosophy.

Let’s pause for a moment to understand the greater philosophical context and try to understand what is meant by “scientific positivism” and “humanistic philosophy.” Although the debate between the sciences and the humanities

over intellectual superiority is not new, it is far from resolved and perhaps more pertinent than ever. Since the early 19th century, the two have become increasingly different in their approaches to knowledge and equally competitive. Each claims superiority over the other in defining and solving the important questions of human life. A simple and current example can be found in the defense against terrorism where science concerns itself with the development of new technologies to thwart attacks, while the humanities is occupied with understanding the philosophical, religious, and social forces that would cause such attacks. Both are genuine efforts to solve the same problem, but they are very different. The debate becomes especially intense when one side accuses the other of wasting time and resources as is often the case. The fundamental difference Wendell Berry draws between the two philosophical perspectives is the attitude towards ignorance. The humanities, Berry argues, live with uncertainty and make paramount “the question of how to act in ignorance” (11). Another approach to the humanistic notion of humanity is the idea that each individual is the accumulation of personal, familial, and cultural history—an infinitude of experiences and thoughts—and yet the compilation of each of those thoughts fails to amount to a complete explanation of a person. No matter how much data we gather, humans can still be unpredictable, we continue to produce the unexpected. There is, in humanity, an inherent element of the unknowable. According to the humanistic approach there is and always will be a bit of mystery in humanity. Ambiguity is an unavoidable part of the human experience, Berry argues, and a fundamentally unavoidable element of thinking, creative human individuals (11).

In contrast to the humanistic approach, science (as described by Berry) possesses a certainty that all will be explained and that all ignorance will eventually be snuffed out in the wake of scientific progress and discovery. For him, this scientific positivism leaves little to no room for the individual, reducing humans to machines and eliminating the possibility of original thought. Berry is not alone in criticizing scientific positivism. Robinson echoes and expands upon Berry’s critique of the scientific reductionist approach to humans in an essay discussing American education. She writes that, “we have been told and told again that our educators are not preparing American youth to be efficient workers. Workers. That language is so common among us now that an extra-terrestrial might think we had actually *lost* the Cold War” (Imagination 24). This, of course, is in reference to the thought that individuals are frequently viewed as a simple piece in the grand mechanism that is the economy, and that

individuals should be prepared and primed to fit specific roles of production. This, clearly, is the result that Berry and Robinson alike fear: a culture guided by scientific positivism that reduces humans to workers and expects production rather than individuality and favors efficiency above all else. Contrasted with the humanistic approach, the scientific approach (at least according to Berry and Robinson) seems feeble and even foolish in understanding human life.

John Ames initially appears to be remarkably uncertain about his own profession. His responses are studded with uncertainty and hesitation, and he is more likely to confess ignorance than offer definitive answers. These characteristics stand in contrast to Boughton, who appears confident in his answers and bold in his declarations, while Ames seems wary of giving straightforward answers. In many of his answers to Lila, he refers to the great “mystery” surrounding life and God and judgment (31). When it comes to Lila’s baptism, he seems terribly uncertain about the proceedings, the appropriateness, and even the preparation of it. How is it that a lifelong preacher, and furthermore, a third generation preacher, can be so uncertain, so hesitant in the work that fills his days and nights? This attitude is not the result of ignorance or laziness, as it is central to his life’s work, although at first glance it could seem to be linked to either timidity or fear.

In reality, Ames’s uncertainty does not spring from any inexperience or insufficient study. To the contrary, his theological approach is deliberate and well considered, and in contrast to what readers might expect, the vagueness of his preaching style is a deliberate and well-pondered theological approach, which he demonstrates in his conversations with his wife. In one particular instance the pair is discussing the final judgment. After overhearing Boughton and Ames discuss the subject, Lila is clearly concerned for Doll, the woman who raised her, as she was never baptized. Ames’s response to Lila is filled with fervor as he explains that imagining others in hell feels like “evil” and “a very grave sin” (101). He refuses to imagine people going to hell and firmly removes himself from any position of authoritative judgment on the matter. Instead, he insists that mortals should not and cannot imagine others in hell and instead they must live with the uncertainty, leaving the subject unexplored. Paradoxically, Ames is certain of uncertainty and although this may seem contradictory, the preacher frequently places this uncertainty at the very center of his theology.

This same cautiousness is demonstrated throughout the novel, particularly in his conversations with Lila, who continually challenges his notions with her unconventional questions. Ames frequently responds to her questions by

simply acknowledging his uncertainty. In fact, “I don’t know” almost becomes a mantra for Ames as he struggles to respond to his wife’s queries. In one passage, he demonstrates particular caution about speaking beyond his understanding. He tells Lila, “If I tried to explain I wouldn’t believe what I was saying to you. That’s lying isn’t it? I’m probably more afraid of that than anything else. I really don’t think preachers ought to lie. Especially about religion” (99). Rather than being motivated by ignorance, Ames’s hesitation spawns from a keen awareness of ignorance and a supreme allegiance to presenting truth and pure truth only. His caution stems from a reverence, rather than fear, of theology, and in his own gentle way, he shows perhaps greater conviction and certainty than any other character in the novel through firm belief in uncertainty.

A staunch belief in uncertainty seems counterproductive, though, especially in religion’s usual paradigm, wherein faith squelches doubt, and certainty stands as the fruit of progression and enlightenment. Belief in uncertainty, however, is far from being an ill-founded concept. As Wendell Berry has argued, “The mystery surrounding our life is probably not significantly reducible” (11). And while this outlook may seem pessimistic or ignorant, it is neither, according to Berry’s observations. In response to the notion that this statement is ignorant, Berry argued that each new discovery opens up more questions than existed before. In hydra-like manner, each answer produces two more questions. Therefore, rather than reducing the mystery surrounding life, exploration and study increase uncertainty in the universe. In response to the thought that Berry’s statement is pessimistic, he argues against the negative connotation of ignorance and, in fact, seems to revel in the thought of it. Ignorance and uncertainty, Berry argues, are not a result of stupidity or laziness, but are instead an inherent part of the human experience, which scientific positivism has not and will not accept (27).

At the crossroads of two forceful paradigms, Ames’s theology of uncertainty takes on ever-greater importance. And while he shies away from certainty, Ames does so for exactly the reasons Berry outlines in his work, namely fear of corruption and the value of the individual. With regards to the former, Ames clearly acknowledges the possibility for preachers to leverage their position for power and personal benefit. His statement that preachers ought not lie, especially about religion, seems flavored by the dark history of corruption that religion often bears (99). With regards to the latter, Ames seems to be a relative newcomer. Although he seems to have always valued the individual, the introduction of Lila into his life seems to have further pushed the question

in his mind. Ames repeatedly tells Lila that she asks important questions that make him reconsider things he had thought already settled. As a character so foreign to Ames's experience, Lila pushes the preacher's beliefs about grace and redemption to new limits by forcing him to apply, what may have previously been merely theoretical ideals, in very real and practical ways to individuals whose experience he could hardly have even imagined. Lila, in many ways, represents the lost and ignorant – those who are never taught a shred of religion and never have a real chance at conversion or baptism. As Lila remarks, the people she grew up with hardly had any concept of days of the week, let alone Sunday or going to church (21). Lila forces Ames to consider the eternal destiny of individuals like her and to reconcile their reality with his belief in a just and loving God. And although some, like Boughton the other preacher, quote, with little hesitation, scriptures clearly explaining the damnation of the unbaptized, Ames instead hesitates and insists on ignorance.

Such a commitment to ambiguity, however, seems counter-productive to the occupation of a preacher. Shouldn't Ames be dispelling doubt, proclaiming the will of God, and extolling the justice of His decrees? Isn't it counter-intuitive for a preacher to be questioning the necessity of baptism to salvation, the very ordinance that marks entrance into his flock? Such questions highlight the tension between the humanistic and scientific paradigms as one tries to provide definitive answers about spiritual destiny, while the other strains to leave room to adjust for each unique individual. As Robinson notes, the humanistic elements of language and culture are hardly concerned with scientific efficiency. She writes, "Some students in France drew my attention to the enormous number of English words that describe the behavior of light. Glimmer, glitter, glister, gleam, glow, glare, shimmer, sparkle, shine and so on. These old words are not utilitarian" (*Imagination* 22). The linguistic behavior described by Robinson seems almost intentionally contrary to the efficient ideals of science, but that is exactly her point. Language and the humanities are not concerned with efficiency, but with human experience, individuality, and originality. This is not to say that language is unconcerned with progressing and expanding its borders, but to the contrary – the mystery and the indescribable continually urge and inspire writers to "make inroads on the vast terrain of what cannot be said" (*Imagination* 20). In this example Robinson demonstrates the humanistic attempt to capture and understand that bit of mystery in humanity. Each new word captures a new nuance of meaning. According to Robinson these repetitions are in many instances no more efficient or effective in communication

except that they somehow come closer to the inherent mystery of humanity. Science and the humanities share the motivation of discovering the unknown, but they fundamentally differ in their idea of the end goal – science aims to discover ultimate answers, and the humanities aims to discover ultimate questions.

Offering a theological perspective on the matter, James Smith writes that “gathering as an answer to the call to worship is a displacement of any human self-confidence or presumption.” (165). For Smith, engaging in Christian worship is embarking on a monumental task and requires the acknowledgement of human weakness and dependence on grace. In pedestrian terms, he writes, “we have a sense that we’re in over our head.” Such renunciation of confidence indeed seems parallel with John Ames’s insistence on ignorance. The notion that true worship requires an acceptance, if not hearty embracing, of ignorance seems contrary to conventional religious pursuit, but is in fact an essential part of coming to know God. And as Smith points out, approaching the all-knowing, in many respects, demands acknowledging our own abundant un-knowing. In parallel fashion, as T.S. Eliot has written, “In order to arrive at what you do not know/ You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance” (201). The path to knowing is, in fact, through the territories of unknowing, which may echo Ames’s embracing of ignorance and privileging patience and charity over certainty. As Berry argues, the two perspectives of humanism and science are irreconcilable, but in a world where scientific positivism seems so heartily accepted, how might readers more clearly define and imagine the humanistic paradigm? Robinson provides a stunning example with the relationship between Ames and Lila.

While Ames is certainly conscious in his decision to embrace a theology of uncertainty, Robinson also seems to use his relationship with Lila to metaphorically embody the ambiguity and ignorance that he so heartily asserts. Ames and Lila pursue their relationship in spite of an abundance of uncertainty. Just as Berry argues, “we *have* to act on the basis of what we know, and what we know is incomplete” (10) The possibility that Lila might spontaneously leave and return to her life as a vagrant challenges all trust that exists between the two. Interestingly, both spouses are supremely aware of this. Ames even goes so far as to tell Lila that if she ever changes her mind about staying that he wants her “to leave by daylight. I want you to have a train ticket in your hand that will take you where you where you want to go” (25), he tells her. Lila frets about the possibility of losing his trust. “If a day came when he stopped trusting her. *When* that day came. She was sure it would” (25). How could a pair

function under such uncertainty? In many ways, Robinson is only highlighting the uncertainty that all couples live with. In spite of promises and vows, all relationships operate under the possibility of dissolution – and yet we act anyway. Robinson is merely exaggerating and highlighting the fact that humans live with no steadfast guarantees, and yet they still live and love in spite of it all. Furthermore, it is this very uncertainty that makes us human.

Throughout her essays, Robinson also reaffirms the importance of love over understanding, again placing definitive knowledge secondary to less easily defined human elements. Speaking of ideology she writes, “In my Bible, Jesus does *not* say, ‘I was hungry and you fed me, though not in such a way as to interfere with free-market principles...’ Until there is evidence that ideology mattered to Jesus, it will be of no interest to me” (Wondrous 139). Robinson clearly places charity as an absolute priority over intellectual or ideological understanding. In many instances, love is made conditional upon understanding, a belief that Robinson turns upon its head. In fact, understanding seems to be much more a fruit of love. Smith, in fact, advocates replacing a hermeneutics of suspicion with a hermeneutics of love, arguing that operating solely under suspicion closes critics to understanding as it precludes the discovery of new truth. Instead, reading under a charitable lens allows scholars to approach texts in a discerning way.

The charitable approach is once again represented in the book, as the majority of the text is narrated by Lila’s unspoken thoughts. Moments with Ames repeatedly remind Lila of stories, whether they be of Doll, St. Louis, or her childhood, and although she says she’d like to tell Ames, only the reader hears them, and Ames is left wondering and trusting. Lila is governed and shaped in many ways by these untold narratives. Rather than probing her for explanations, however, Ames demonstrates incredible patience and gently encourages, but never forces, “I think you are asking these questions because of some hard things that have happened, the things you won’t talk about,” he says. “If you did tell me about them, I could probably not say more than that life is a very deep mystery, and that finally the grace of God is all that can resolve it.” (31). In this statement, Ames demonstrates both his patience and faith in Lila, by not demanding an explanation and allowing her to give an explanation in her own time. Simultaneously, he acknowledges the importance of believing in God in spite of the mystery that surrounds belief itself and demonstrates his own comfort in the face of uncertainty.

Lila's wandering inner narratives are also arranged in a way as to denote a vagueness and uncertainty. Woven throughout the narrative, the text is a blend of present and past often leaving the reader with a wispy sense of time and place and creating a somewhat ethereal mindset. In spite of the seemingly irrational flow of thought and memory, Robinson blends the plot into a stunningly realistic narrative. The construction of the novel therefore reflects the theology of uncertainty as it seems to follow an irrational flow and yet thereby achieves a fantastically realistic feeling.

In a particularly moving passage, Ames draws an interesting distinction between fact and hope, contrasting prayer as a hope with baptism as a fact and ultimately acknowledging the uncertainty of everything within the human realm. "*Family is a prayer,*" he says, "*Wife is a prayer. Marriage is a prayer*" (237). As if to say that each of these things is only a hope, based on faith, bound by charity, Ames acknowledges the uncertainty of all relationships and the necessity for action under uncertainty. He continues, however, to say that baptism, however, is a certainty: "[W]hat I'd call a fact" (237).

After exploring the theology of uncertainty, readers revisiting the baptism scene will see it in a completely different light. Rather than serving as a point of uncertainty and doubt for Ames, the baptism is a locus of certainty. It could be argued that Ames's discovery is a true certitude in ambiguity. Although the slipshod nature of the ceremony once gave Ames reason to doubt, he now finds newborn certainty in the validity of uncertainty. While baptism is a certainty, however, the intention is what matters more than the particulars of the ceremony. Robinson, through Ames, seems to be making a profoundly new statement on the assumed reality of human existence and the role of uncertainty in it.

Why is it, though, that Ames decides to make such a distinction about baptism? And how might this be an argument for increased mercy in religion? What is the distinction between baptism as a "fact" and marriage, family, wife, and *everything* as a prayer? What makes baptism such a crucial moment of separation in his logic? One early critic marked the distinction as a means of highlighting the tension between "faith as sensibility and faith as doctrine" (Ulin). Such a distinction seems to interpret the difference as one between attitude and intellectual principle which in some ways seems to fall short of a satisfying response. Eve Tushnet offers just that. She writes, "The most compelling element of Lila's religious vision is its tacit opposition between two ways of living in the world, the way of work and the way of baptism" (53). She continues,

Lila likes work and takes pride in it.... Work produces pride, but poverty corrodes that pride and leaves only shame behind. You can never work hard enough to escape shame; you can never earn the certainty that you deserve. Baptism, [however], is unearned; it's complete in a moment, unlike work, which must be slogged through. Work is time; baptism is the inbreaking of eternity. You can be judged on the quality of your work but the quality of your baptism – including the quality of your faith at baptism – is not relevant. Baptism is done to you, not by you, and so you can never be proud of it.

Surrendering responsibility to God, as in baptism, is an entry into uncertainty, as individuals place their fate in the hands of God rather than taking it upon themselves. According to this argument, baptism is, in fact, a distinctly different way of life – a completely new paradigm independent from Lila's former ideology of work and also separate from Ames's theology of uncertainty. This contrast runs perfectly parallel with the debate between the sciences and humanities and is a direct treatment of uncertainty and positivism. Ignorance, like grace, is offered to and totally necessary for mortals in their struggle through existence, but this need is not shared with God. He, instead, is the giver, not the recipient, of grace and the omniscient, not the uncertain. This highlights the difference between God and men and seems to resonate with the words, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways" (Isaiah 55:8). Communion, in this case, is not an emphasis on the similarity between man and God, but their difference, namely the contrast between lack and possession, God as giver and mortal as recipient. Baptism is the crossroads between the rightly and inherently ignorant human position and the certitude of deity, and therefore, marks a distinct difference between baptism as a fact and all else as prayer. Again, this situation beautifully recasts the contrast between certainty and doubt and allows for the humanistic uncertainty in individuals and added mercy in religion.

John Ames may certainly be characterized as a preacher filled with hesitancy and steeped in uncertainty, but rather than plaguing his life with weakness, these characteristics become his greatest virtue. This virtue is not accidental, but deliberate, presenting a different, gentler approach towards belief and humanity: a humanistic approach. Throughout the novel, Robinson develops, through Ames, a theology of uncertainty, in which the greatest power comes to the characters because of their acceptance and appreciation of uncertainty. Lila and Ames represent a living relationship in which ambiguity is accepted and allowed and where trust takes priority over possession. Even the loose

chronology of the novel itself reflects an awareness of the same principles, forcing readers to exercise the very theology of uncertainty promoted in the book. Placed within the context of a philosophical debate between scientific positivism and humanistic ambiguity, Ames's philosophy gains ever-greater significance as a manifesto for the inherent mystery of each individual's experience. In an age filled with perhaps more information than any other, the acceptance of mystery and uncertainty becomes ever more relevant in shaping perceptions of the world and perspectives on what it means to be human. And paradoxically, perhaps the most powerful and satisfying response to the incessant hunger for knowledge is the acceptance of the unknown.

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